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THE DULL VIRTUOUS AND THE BRILLIANT WICKED

The room above mine, in the boarding house which (perforce!) I call home, is occupied by a young person of thirty-five or thereabouts, who lives his life by a system of regular and highly respectable rules. He is generally in by ten o'clock (when he goes out o' nights, which is not frequently), moves about noiselessly and inoffensively, and is apparently in bed by eleven. I came across him only yesterday at the soda-water fountain of the neighboring drug store, reading a Sunday School magazine between sips at a glass of plain soda, and looking as if he were enjoying himself. He doesn't swear, doesn't drink, nor smoke. In the two or three times I have been in his room, all the reading matter I have seen consisted of church journals, evening papers, and one or two of Edna Lyall's colorless attempts at literature. He is always on time for his meals. He goes to church twice a Sunday. He invariably wears a black bow-tie, an old-fashioned turned-down collar, and a stiff white shirt with unopened front and no studs; the rest of his sombre clothes hang indifferently. He never fails to have an umbrella and rubber shoes when it rains or snows,—he may leave the house in the morning without them, but he always manages to have them at desirable times when others are not so fortunate. At meals, he eats just so much, and eats it in the most approved style for digestive purposes. He drinks neither coffee nor tea; always milk. He seems to entertain a fear that he might commit himself in some way, so he doesn't talk much at table. I have never heard him get into the thick of an argument; he generally waits until the winning side clearly shows itself, and then joins it with wags of the head and smug, knowing smiles. I never knew him to give a good hearty laugh during all the time he has been in the house; when he laughs, it is in short, throaty barks, and sounds as if it hurt him. In a word, he is precise and careful in small things. I saw him counting his change the other day, and a look of worry came over his face because he had eighty-nine cents instead of ninety. He sits between the Society Girl and

the Elderly Spinster, and evokes little notice and no enthusiasm from either, although a couple of old ladies farther down the table, actively interested in foreign missions, point to him as "such a good young man."

In the room below me lives a man, also about thirty-five, but oh! so different. He doesn't wear a black bow-tie, but the reddest sort of red four-in-hand, a vivid shirt with the latest kind of collar, all set off by a well-fitting (and very blonde) check suit. He is never on time for his meals, and it is quite refreshing to me to find that he is often caught out in rain or snow without an umbrella. He eats fast and eats everything. He comes in anywhere from twelve to three in the morning, and there are occasions when he makes a deal of noise,—suspicious stumblings up the stairs, and undertoned carolling of music-hall melodies in heart-rending disregard of harmony. He never goes to church on a Sunday, but lies abed until the dinner bell rings, and, when he isn't sleeping, is reading the sporting page of the newspaper or a novel of the *Victoria Cross* or (at best) Zola kinds. I have occasionally stopped at his door, however, on my way to my room in the early evening, and have seen in a corner a small bookcase, recognizing therein Macaulay, Dickens, Eliot, and Charles Lever. He smokes all over the house, dropping his ashes promiscuously. He is always cheerful, rips out a healthy curse once in a while (which nobody minds except my immaculate neighbor above) and tells a mighty good story. He never hesitates to say what he thinks, with more or less fantastic effect, indeed, but I never knew him wantonly to hurt the feelings of our fellow boarders. He doesn't bother about small things, but takes life as it comes. The landlady and servants adore him; go out of their several ways to make allowances for him and serve him. At the table he sits opposite the Society Girl and the Elderly Spinster and flirts outrageously with both, much to their giggling delight. The foreign missions old ladies shake their heads, look solemn, and talk about a "wasted life."

Without in the least desiring to place a premium upon wickedness (if such it be), I must declare for myself in favor of my down-stairs neighbor, who stands for what I shall call the "Brilliant Wicked," rather than for him of the floor above who per-

sonifies the "Dull Virtuous." The former sheds about him the stimulating influence of contact with vital, varying thoughts and environment, while the latter seems a thing cut out of stone (or putty!),—a lifeless, monotonous pattern which tells nothing of either the joys or the pains of living. He who is virtuous because he is dull does not offer anything reassuring for present or future. This type of man creates in me a distaste akin to the effect that "Burke's Works" produced upon De Quincey or the sound of his own name, John Donne, exerted upon that worthy chaplain to James I and dean of St. Paul's; in the first case, the book was "both eyesore and earsore" to its possessor from the lack of euphony in the title, and in the second, the dean ascribed his deafness to the intolerable harshness and jingle which ensued whenever his names were spoken together.

I am glad to think there are many men in the world as good as they are manly, men whom we are not slow to acknowledge as such when we meet them, but I none the less hesitate to believe that the man who goes to church regularly, secludes himself from contact with his fellows, lacks a sense of humor, frowns upon pleasures he himself cannot understand, thinks it his duty to tell his friends all the unpleasant things about them and none of the good, is, necessarily, one who exercises a beneficent influence. While I will admit that he who has never placed himself where he could possibly have the inclination or temptation to be otherwise than "straight," must receive considerations, I assert that our human brother is the more interesting. I wax, I confess, more enthusiastic over the brilliant, sinning Richard Brinsley Sheridan of *Rivals* fame, who fought two duels in behalf of Miss Linley, "the Maid of Bath," whom he afterwards married, than over that eminently virtuous contemporary member of the House of Commons, one Pease, who, being asked by an Irishman named O'Dwyer for "an explanation, his card and address," noncombatively replied that he gave no explanations except on his legs in the House, had no card, and couldn't recall his address. I can understand the impatience of the peppery Ellenborough, England's ablest Lord Chief Justice of all the Georgian era, while he listened once to a dull, narrow, righteous old peer making a prosy speech. The

speaker kept repeating "I ask myself" so and so. "Yes," said Ellenborough, "and a damned silly answer you'll get."

Sometimes, as Hawthorne has it, we go all wrong by trying too hard to go all right. In this life there is little to be gained morally, or any other way, without taking a risk. There is no such thing as an improvised saint. I prefer the person who is in the thick of the fight, even though he may fall by the wayside a few (or even many) times, and it is the daring sinner who, in the midst of his sinning, shows so often broad understandings and sympathies. We have to grope upwards along the human pathway, and therefore it is that when one of us makes a bold leap in the dark, as it were, interest and admiration are at once awakened, for whether it be a good leap or a bad, it is still a leap. It is not that we admire the bad, but, manlike, we love a struggle, and the brilliant wicked, to my mind, are in the struggle all the time. To the Puritans, the Cavalier characteristics of love of woman and wine seemed wholly open to condemnation; they could not appreciate that the elements of evil which they so sturdily denounced were almost proportionately accompanied by rare and splendid virtues, by great courage and uncompromising loyalty.

One's tastes in books illustrate how he is apt to feel in this matter. Now I do not care for the characters who live that awful morality which goes by rote. To me, Dickens's Edith Dombey is infinitely more interesting and stirring than Esther Summerson, and Lady Dedlock truer to the nobler instincts of life than the spineless Lucy Manette. I do not wonder that Sir Leicester Dedlock, notwithstanding the revelations concerning his Lady, which hurt so disastrously his patrician pride, found that his old love rose triumphant out of the ashes of sin. I do wonder that there could have been any affinity between Lucy and splendid, human Sidney Carton. Montague Tigg, good-natured, wily vagabond as he is, is far more attractive and suggestive than that milk-and-water provincial, Tom Pinch. The erring, handsome, generous Steerforth and the colorless Betsy Trotwood controlled David Copperfield; which of the two makes you dwell the more on the cardinal virtues as we know them?

I prefer Thackeray's Barry Lyndon, the rollicking unprincipled adventurer, to his supine William Dobbin, who is at once irritating and tiresome. I feel glad that he at last married Amelia Osborne, and that, if we are freely to translate the concluding lines of *Vanity Fair*, he was not overly happy with her. Amelia was Thackeray's idea of a good woman, yet how utterly silly, vapid, and toneless she seems; Becky Sharp in the midst of her waywardness is a better influence than is she. I will venture to say that the reader of Wilkie Collins will take his Count Fosco, in *The Woman in White*, as the most magnetic of all the novelist's characters because of the complex commingling of grace and humor, intellect and villainy. Likewise D'Artagnan, the bred-in-the-bone fighter, and Aramis, the crafty priest, appeal to us despite the moral irregularity of most that they did. The morbid Heathcliffe of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, with the vital memory of a love which was life-long, yet brooding over wrongs and studying revenge, reminds one of such a virile, inward, lonely struggle as ever arises from one of Schumann's songs.

Hawthorne's Hilda, lofty and beautiful as she is, does not appeal to me as do the tempted, human Miriam or the magnificent, passionate Zenobia. In not so different a way, who is not delighted with Mark Twain's brilliant little scamp Huck Finn, or fails to entertain sympathy for Bartley Hubbard, Howell's wonderful illustration of the brilliant modern sinner?

As I recall the men who figure in history, I find my prejudices quite as strong there as in fiction. Fully recognizing the great deeds of Wellington, I am still mindful of the fact that Napoleon, whom he fought and conquered, arouses far more enthusiasm in the average person. The former, throughout life, was the virtuous, able patriot and soldier following the beaten path of duty with cold, precise, methodical tread; the latter was not only the most brilliant but the most complex sinner the world has ever seen. His career was an unsurpassed egotistical dream, it is true, but it was a dream of glory in which an unbridled nature was revealed in manifold and ever interesting contradictions—one moment caressing a child, another, rewarding a foot-soldier with the cross of the Legion, and the next conspiring

in the murder of a Duc d' Enghein. As I looked upon the equestrian statue of the Iron Duke, opposite Apsley House, I felt how fit was unresponsive bronze for the portrayal of the man whose axiom was, "Say what you have to say, don't quote Latin, and sit down." On the other hand, the head of Napoleon, in the Corcoran Gallery, at Washington, seems the impenetrable mask which hid the very personification of misconducted energy.

I do not find the calm, virtuous, conservative John Jay, who graduated from college with an oration on "The Blessings of Peace," then to serve his country well at home and abroad, anything like as inspiring as the vividly brilliant, though erring, Webster. The virtuous Southey, author of ponderous prose and heavy poetry, supported the wife and family of the drug-ridden, irresponsible Coleridge, because the latter could not or would not do it himself; yet this eminently "virtuous" laureate does not touch the chords that the charming, many-sided "wicked" Coleridge does, or the talented but passionate Byron, — although, if one takes as verity the word of that biting Irish lawyer, John Philpot Curran, the "noble Lord" passes out of the lists of the brilliant wicked, to be classed among those who show forth what Walter Shandy calls "The Sniveling Virtue of Meekness." Speaking of the poet's "Farewell" to Lady Byron, Curran says, "I protest I do not understand this kind of whimpering; here is a man who first weeps over his wife, and then wipes his eyes with the public."

The noted Bishop Wilberforce, of the mid-Victorian era, son of the greater William, foe of slavery and friend of the younger Pitt, virtuous and able (but narrow), is not to be compared in appeal with the volcanic Swift, "The wild Dean from Ireland," as he once called himself, of whom the Earl of Nottingham, in the latter days of the reign of Anne, said "he was hardly suspected of being a Christian." Or again, that cold, impeccable leader of Parliament in the time of George III, the younger Pitt himself, does not attract as does his contemporary, Charles Fox; brilliant gambler, lovable drunkard. Nor is John Quincy Adams, honest of purpose and fearless in bearing, but cold and repellant, as compelling as is the explosive Andrew Jackson, he who would rarely acknowledge a superior, and who, when a senator, could

never make a speech because of the violence of his feelings ; "I have seen him attempt it repeatedly," said Jefferson, "and choke with rage."

Dr. Johnson said he would as soon dine with the highwayman Jack Ketch, as with John Wilkes, thrice elected member from Middlesex, and thrice refused admission to the House, but admitted upon a fourth election and subsequently made Lord Mayor of London. Nevertheless, I would vastly prefer this same Wilkes to the weak but virtuous North, who, according to published correspondence, permitted his king to control him, so that instead of resigning and owning himself, he carried on the bloody, costly, and, to the English, disastrous American Revolution in direct opposition to his own best judgment and personal wishes. The visionary, magnetic, intellectually superb Aaron Burr, past-master in the art of sinning (to most of us), takes precedence over the learned and cold William Wirt, Attorney-General under Madison, who conducted his prosecution in the great treason trial. Who can say that Louis IX of France, canonized as Saint, the religious fanatic who spent his best efforts in sentimental crusades to the Holy Land, was so great a man for his country as that intensely interesting sinner, Louis XI, who rescued her from the throes of discord and made her a united nation? I confess to a leaning towards Sarah Jennings, the scheming Duchess of Marlborough, rather than towards the comparatively virtuous but decidedly negative Queen Anne, who had as a device "*Semper Idem*," which the malicious Swift rendered "*Worse and Worse*." Robert Walpole, the consummate but corrupt politician of the reigns of the first two Georges (the Bob Booty in Gay's *Beggar's Opera*), is called by Thackeray "the old pagan," but the novelist hastens to add "with his hireling House of Commons he defended liberty for us,"—is he not more winning than the eminently virtuous, frigid, uninteresting Spencer Perceval, whose only claim to recognition at the hands of posterity lies in the tragic chance that he was murdered while holding the office of Premier under the Regent, afterwards George IV?

I cannot think any further word necessary to substantiate the claim for thoughtful consideration which the "*Brilliant Wicked*"

have over the "Dull Virtuous," but if something more weighty than this rambling plea is wanted, I shall quote *The Professor at the Breakfast Table*: "I don't believe the Devil would give half as much for the services of a sinner as he would for those of one of these folks that are always doing virtuous acts in a way to make them unpleasing." And I listen to the cautious footsteps of the chap above me, hearken smilingly to the stumblings from below, look once again at my books, few but eloquent, and whisper to myself "Hear, hear!"

H. MERIAN ALLEN.

Philadelphia, Pa.